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ABSTRACT

In "The Reason for Poetry," the first of two lectures contained in this booklet, the poet William Meredith argues for a more generous definition of poetry. To move away from the narrow appreciation of poetry as "what I like," Meredith suggests that readers must shift their focus from their own expectations on reading a poem to an understanding of the poet's intentions. He describes the three roles the poet can assume as: dissident--trying to create a ritual for effecting change; apologist--possibly focusing on errors or imperfections in society and human nature, but implying an underlying acceptance of the model; and solitary--establishing intense, though limited, agreement with the reader as individual to individual. Far from being definitive, he argues, these descriptions merely awaken the reader to the infinity of intentions one can allow the poet. He concludes that it is in being generous with the poet that the reader discovers one of the greatest powers of poetry--the power to astonish. In "The Reason for Criticism," the second lecture in the booklet, Meredith advocates a similar generosity of spirit among critics. Using his own poetry and various pieces of criticism, Meredith distinguishes between constructive and destructive criticism. Impressionistic and oblique praise, he suggests, can enlighten a subject critically more effectively than the most attentive destructive act. (MM)

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Reasons for Poetry
&
The Reason for Criticism

TWO LECTURES
DELIVERED AT THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
ON MAY 7, 1979, AND MAY 5, 1980

by William Meredith

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Preface

FOR POETRY TO BECOME THE USEFUL ART AMONG US that it has always been in healthy cultures, certain natural generosities must be accorded to it that are now being withheld. The poets must give freely and deliberately the gift of entertainment — accessible, professional, and above all attractive entertainment. Readers and listeners must give a quality of attention open to such delight, suspending habitual defense against an art they may dislike or be ignorant or even afraid of. The act of generosity required of critics (and this could well deplete their numbers) is selfless appreciation, praise being the essential mode of criticism.

In the following remarks, originally delivered as Poetry Consultant at the Library of Congress, I have avoided discussing the first of these three magnanimities. Every poet I've ever talked to about the usefulness of our profession "naturally prefers," as T. S. Eliot has said, "to write for as large and miscellaneous an audience as possible." That is probably as far as our agreement should hope to reach. I have spoken rather about the generosity of mind required of the reader and the critic. The readers and listeners who make up the audience at the Library of Congress, and perhaps the critics who came to the lectures, struck me as being among the saved. But I lectured them all about generosity the way a clergyman will flay the congregation in the pews in front of him for nonattendance committed by others. Maybe word of it will get back to the offenders.

Jon Wallen

William Meredith reading his poems at the Coolidge Auditorium of the Library of Congress.
Mr. Meredith was Consultant in Poetry in English at the Library from 1978 to 1980.

Reasons for Poetry

The Mexican poet José Emilio Pacheco, in a poem called "Dissertation on Poetic Propriety," asks for "a new definition . . . a name, some term or other . . . to avoid the astonishment and rages of those who say, so reasonably, looking at a poem: 'Now this is not poetry.'" I too want to argue for a broader definition of poetry, a definition which will increase our sense of the multitudes that poetry contains. For those of us who care about poetry in this time of widely diverging definitions are apt to be consciously limited in our tastes, and churlish in our distastes. We often have more precise ideas, based on these distastes, about what poetry is not than about what it is.

If I cannot come up with the new definition Pacheco asks for, what I say is at least intended to turn aside the easy negative response in myself and in others to poems which are not immediately congenial. For whenever we say, "Now this is not poetry," we are adding to the disuse of all poetry.

Perhaps the most useful definition, in fact, would begin with a statement about expectation: the expectation with which a reader engages a poem, and the reasons for which a poet may have undertaken the poem, and the possible discrepancy between these two. We have all had the experience of fighting a work of art because it was not doing what we were asking of it. John Ashbery said in an interview: "My feeling is that a poem that communicates something that's already known to the reader is not really communicating anything to him and in fact shows a lack of respect for him." Since what is communicated in a work of art is also how it is communicated, a false expectation is almost certain to produce a false reading. And often we confirm this by the happy surprise that comes when a work we had been defeated by suddenly opens itself to us — we find that it performs very well the job of work which was its reason, once we stop asking it to perform some other service which was no part of its intention.

A word here about *liking* a poem. This should of course be our primary objective and motive. But to like is a function of the critical intelligence, as this passage by W. H. Auden makes clear:

> As readers, we remain in the nursery stage as long as we cannot distinguish between taste and judgment, so long, that is, as the only possible verdicts we can pass on a book are two: this I like, this I don't like

He goes on with the lovely, schoolmasterly, and abashing accuracy of an Audenism:

> For an adult reader, the possible verdicts are five: I can see this is good and I like it; I can see this is good but I don't like it; I can see this is good and, though at present I don't like it, I believe that with perseverance I shall come to like it; I can see this is trash but I like it; I can see this is trash and I don't like it.

My argument is that we should use the third option as often as possible, when the first response is not spontaneous with us. When we can't say of a poem, especially of a poem that comes recommended, I can see this is good and I like it, we owe it to ourselves and the poem to try to say, I can see this is good, and though at present I don't like it, I believe that with perseverance, et cetera.

Poems seem to come into being for various and distinct reasons. These vary from poem to poem and from poet to poet. The reason for a poem is apt to be one of the revelations attendant on its making. No surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader, Frost said. The reason for a new poem is, in some essential, a new reason. This is why poets, in the large Greek sense of *makers*, are crucial to a culture. They respond newly, but in the familiar tribal experience of language, to what new thing befalls the tribe. I shall have some comments to make here about three generic reasons for which poems seem to come into being, but even within these genera, the occasion of a poem is always a new thing under the sun.

And poets don't respond as one, they respond in character, with various intuition, to the new experience. What each maker makes is poetry, but why he makes it, his reason, is his unique intuition. The reason determines the proper mode of apprehension. It is part of the purpose of every poem to surprise us with our own capacity for change, for a totally new response. For example, David Wagoner's lines called aggressively, "This Is a Wonderful Poem":

> Come at it carefully, don't trust it, that isn't its right name,
> It's wearing stolen rags, it's never been washed, its breath
> Would look moss-green if it were really breathing,
> It won't get out of the way, it stares at you
> Out of eyes burnt gray as the sidewalk,
> Its skin is overcast with colorless dirt,
> It has no distinguishing marks, no I.D. cards,
> It wants something of yours but hasn't decided
> Whether to ask for it or just take it,
> There are no policemen, no friendly neighbors,

No peacekeeping busybodies to yell for, only this
Thing standing between you and the place you were headed,
You have about thirty seconds to get past it, around it,
Or simply to back away and try to forget it,
It won't take no for an answer: try hitting it first
And you'll learn what's trembling in its torn pocket.
Now, what do you want to do about it?

The resilience such a poem asks of us is a reader's first responsibility. To assume one knows what a poem is going to do is (to turn John Ashbery's statement around) to show a lack of respect for it. I think it is chiefly a lack of resilience that has kept the poetry public so small in our country, and has divided what public there is into dozens of hostile sects. We say of our own chosen poetry—Olson or Frost, Lowell or Bly—the poetry whose reasons strike us as reasonable, "Now this is poetry," and then generally, of everything else, loudly, airily and with great conviction, "and this is not." Criticism, which is at its most perceptive when most appreciative, is thus often *narrowly* appreciative. It divides and rules and does little to promulgate the astonishment, the larger force of poetry.

And it is very easy to reject poems whose reasons do not declare or recommend themselves to us. Take an extreme mode of recent poetry which Robert Pinsky has described in *The Situation of Modern Poetry*. This school, he says, has "a prevalent diction or manner" which embodies, "in language, a host of reservations about language, human reason, and their holds on life." He quotes a poem by W. S. Merwin and says of it: "It moves in a resolutely elliptical way from image to atomistic image, finally reaching a kind of generalization-against generalizing in the line:

Today belongs to few and tomorrow to no one."

Pinsky concludes: "This poem presents a style well suited to a certain deeply skeptical or limiting vision of the poetic imagination and its place in the world."

To appreciate a poem conceived in these terms—conceived for what many readers would consider non-reasons—is not easy for most of us. What kind of poem harbors "a host of reservations about language, human reason, and their holds on life," and with a "deeply skeptical or limiting vision of the poetic imagination and its place in the world?" *Aha!* says the part of our mind that waits with a club for *what is not a poem*. How can anything call itself a poem if it mistrusts language and the power of the poetic imagination? Is not all mystery made lucid to the poetic imagination, and precisely in language? But the often ill-advised left side of the brain is wrong to thus object. Let us ask it to consider a poem

whose last line proclaims this heresy, whose last line in fact is, "There are limits to imagination." This is Robert Hass's beautiful "Homeric Simile." It purports to be a simile about how a soldier falls in a certain Japanese movie, and it likens him chiefly to a great pine tree, an image which does not appear in the movie:

Homeric Simile

When the swordsman fell in Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*
in the gray rain,
in Cinemascope and the Tokugawa dynasty,
he fell straight as a pine, he fell
as Ajax fell in Homer
in chanted dactyls and the tree was so huge
the woodsman returned for two days
to that lucky place before he was done with the sawing
and on the third day he brought his uncle.

They stacked logs in the resinous air,
hacking the small limbs off,
tying those bundles separately.
The slabs near the root
were quartered and still they were awkwardly large;
the logs from midtree they halved:
ten bundles and four great piles of fragrant wood,
moons and quarter moons and half moons
ridged by the saw's tooth.

The woodsman and the old man his uncle
are standing in midforest
on a floor of pine silt and spring mud.
They have stopped working
because they are tired and because
I have imagined no pack animal
or primitive wagon. They are too canny
to call in neighbors and come home
with a few logs after three days' work.
They are waiting for me to do something
or for the overseer of the Great Lord
to come and arrest them.

How patient they are!
The old man smokes a pipe and spits.
The young man is thinking he would be rich
if he were already rich and had a mule.
Ten days of hauling
and on the seventh day they'll probably
be caught, go home empty-handed
or worse. I don't know

whether they're Japanese or Mycenaean
and there's nothing I can do.
The path from here to that village
is not translated. A hero, dying,
gives off stillness to the air.
A man and a woman walk from the movies
to the house in the silence of separate fidelities.
There are limits to imagination.

At one critical point in the narrative — and the simile is offered as a story — the poet heightens the mystery of metamorphosis by dramatizing the process itself:

They have stopped working
because they are tired and because
I have imagined no pack animal
or primitive wagon . . .
They are waiting for me to do something
or for the overseer of the Great Lord
to come and arrest them . . .
I don't know
whether they're Japanese or Mycenaean
and there's nothing I can do.

We are asked to believe that the poem takes place at the limits of imagination, where the poet's debilitating reluctances threaten to overpower his fancy and drag it back into the territory of the literal. And the poem shows us, by exhibiting its own process, how the energy is to be found, in the process of simile itself, to mix modes and times and feelings in ways that are disturbing and mysterious and, for our souls' sakes, necessary.

Here I want to posit three roles a poem may take, and to suggest that one of these roles accounts for the stance a poem takes. I offer these three stances not to head off the proper surprise of a new poem but as an exercise in resilience, the way you might strengthen your eyesight by looking at objects near, middling, and far in regular succession. I think of them as three *reasons* for poetry, identifiable genetically with the DNA impulse which starts a poem growing. The reason behind a poem shapes its growth and determines the way it is delivered. To stretch the metaphor further, it determines how the poem is to be picked up and spanked into breath by the reader.

If every poem is new, it is also associated in its own mind, and ideally in the reader's, with other poems of its species. Poems hold one another in place in our minds, Robert Frost said, the way the stars hold one another in place in the firmament.

The three roles I envision are these:

1) The poet as dissident. Underlying poems conceived by the poet as dissident is a social criticism, whether of a tyranny, like George III's or Stalin's, of an abuse, like nuclear pollution, or of a system, like capitalism. As an activist poet, the dissident is likely to be formally radical, since the large metaphor of his work is revolution, but not necessarily.

2) The poet as apologist. Underlying poems conceived by the poet as apologist is acceptance or approval of the human and social predicament of his tribe. However much the poem may focus on errors or imperfections in its subject, there is implied an order or decorum in the model. Often the poem's mode is praise, overt or implicit, of the specific subject or of the human condition. Every work of art, the Christian apologist W. H. Auden said, is by its formal nature a gesture of astonishment at that greatest of miracles, the principle of order in the universe. The poet as apologist is apt to have a pronounced sense of form, but not necessarily.

3) The third and commonest stance of the poet is the poet as solitary. While the poem by the poet as solitary will sometimes take the stance of talking to itself, more often it speaks from the poet as individual to the reader as another individual, and intends to establish a limited, intense agreement of feeling. There is no implicit agreement about social needs or predicaments. Such solitary experiences, and they make up most of lyric poetry, carry on their backs the world they are concerned with, like itinerant puppet-shows. They create a momentary event where the poet and the reader dwell together in some mutual astonishment of words. The best teacher I ever had told us a lyric poem can only say one of three things. It can say "Oh, the beauty of it" or "Oh, the pity of it," or it can say "Oh."

This is a crude trinity, and if useful at all, useful at the elementary level of detecting and dispelling false expectation. I will rehearse the three roles with some examples.

If a poet is committed to an overriding social grievance, as currently some of the best European, Latin American, and United States minority writers are, the poem is best read as a kind of ceremonial rite, with a specific purpose. A dissident poem aspires to be an effective ritual for causing change.

If a poet feels, on the other hand (to quote an easygoing character in one of my own poems) that the human predicament "is just a good bind to be in," the poem should be read as an occasional poem, occasioned by some instance—however flawed or imperfect—of an existing order. An apologist poem aspires to be a celebration.

If a poet thinks of himself only as a man or woman speaking to men and women, the poem should be read simply as poem. A solitary's poem is a message written on one person's clean slate to be copied on another person's clean slate as an exercise in person-hood. A solitary poem wants to become a little universe or a charade.

It is my cheerful illusion that these are fairly clear distinctions to apply to modern poems. Though I apply them to poems, they reflect intentions, brief or long-standing, of the poet who aligns himself with them. They shade into one another, and readers would disagree about many borderline cases. But at best, they could be helpful in determining how a poem wants to be read.

Here is an attractive example of a militant poem, by a poet who I think was twelve years old at the time.

The Cemetery Bridge

Well, as you all should know, there's a dead man
in the George Washington Bridge.
How he got there, they was digging and drilling
these real deep holes for the pillows
of the George Washington Bridge.
While they was digging and drilling, a man fell in.
Of course he was dead, but we will never know for sure.
So they pay his family millions of dollars
so they won't have to dig him up and start all over again.
Please spread this story around.

Terrence Des Pres, a very gifted prose writer, believes that all serious writing today must be politically committed writing, militant writing. In a letter he wrote to me soon after we had debated this for the first time, he put it this way: "Most Anglo-American poetry (excluding old guys like Milton and Blake) looks at life and says, that's how it is, that's the human condition. Political poetry also says that's how things are, but then, instead of settling for the hard comfort of some 'human condition,' it goes on to say, this is not how things must be always. Not even death is that final, when you consider that some men are forced to die like dogs, while others have the luck to die human. Political poetry is concerned with precisely this distinction. And if, by way of example, we ardently oppose the designs of state and the powers that be — as, say, during the Viet Nam war years — is this opposition not a true part of our experience? and if so, is it not a fit subject for poems? Fitter, perhaps than the old laments like lost love, the soul's virginity, etc?"

The poem Terrence Des Pres sent with that letter is by the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert.

Five Men

1

They take them out in the morning
to the stone courtyard
and put them against the wall
five men
two of them very young
the others middle-aged
nothing more
can be said about them

2

when the platoon
level their guns
everything suddenly appears
in the garish light
of obviousness
the yellow wall
the cold blue
the black wire on the wall
instead of a horizon
that is the moment
when the five senses rebel
they would gladly escape
like rats from a sinking ship
before the bullet reaches its destination
the eye will perceive the flight of the projectile
the ear record a steely rustle
the nostrils will be filled with biting smoke
a petal of blood will brush the palate
the touch will shrink and then slacken
now they lie on the ground
covered up to their eyes with shadow
the platoon walks away
their buttons straps
and steel helmets
are more alive
than those lying beside the wall

3

I did not learn this today
I knew it before yesterday
so why have I been writing
unimportant poems on flowers
what did the five talk of
the night before the execution

of prophetic dreams
of an escapade in a brothel
of automobile parts
of a sea voyage
of how when he had spades
he ought not to have opened
of how vodka is best
after wine you get a headache
of girls
of fruit
of life

thus one can use in poetry
names of Greek shepherds
one can attempt to catch the colour of morning sky
write of love
and also
once again
in dead earnest
offer to the betrayed world
a rose

The intention of Herbert's subtle and moving poem seems to be to convert poets from writing the old laments like lost love, the soul's virginity, etc., and to enlist them in action to change their political circumstances, if not indeed their own political natures. The poem does not simplify. It retains the demanding reticence of poetry. As a conscience, the reader responds, or not, to its call for change, as clear and ambiguous as Rilke's "You must change your life."

Here is a third example of dissident poetry, a fragment of one of June Jordan's powerful statements about our society's way with black citizens. Irony is its heavy device, but it is pure enough poetry not to say all it means, not to mean only what it says.

Poem: On the Murder of Two Human Being
Black Men, Denver A. Smith and
his unidentified Brother, at Southern
University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1972

What you have to realize is about private property
like
for example do you know how much the president's
house weighs in at
do you know that?

But see it's important because obviously
that had to be some heavy building some kinda
heavy heavy bricks and whatnot
dig
the students stood outside the thing
outside of it
and also
on the grass belonging to somebody else (although
who the hell can tell who owns the grass)
but
well the governor/he said the students
in addition
to standing outside the building that was
The House of The President
in addition to that and in addition to
standing on the grass that was growing
beside that heavy real estate
in addition (the governor said) the students
used
quote vile language unquote and
what you have to realize about quote
vile language unquote
is what you have to realize about private property
and
that is
you and your mother and your father and your
sister and your brother
you
and you and you
be strictly lightstuff on them scales
be strictly human life
be lightstuff
weighing in at zero
plus
you better clean your language up
don't be calling mothafuckas *mothafuckas*
pigs *pigs*
animals *animals*
murderers *murderers*
you
weighing less than blades of grass the last
dog peed on
less than bricks smeared grey by pigeon shit
less than euphemisms for a mercenary and
a killer
you be lightstuff
lightstuff on them scales

For all that it is implicit, in these three poems we have just looked at, that the role of the dissident is the most *urgent* role at a time like ours, I think there is never any deliberate choosing, except on grounds of temperament — the poem's or the poet's — between the three roles. The time is always *a time like ours*. Ours is simply the one we must respond to truly. Each of the three responses I am trying to delineate asks a great deal of the writer and the reader. The three short poems I offer as examples of apologist poems don't shirk moral responsibility, but rather contain it within a system whose imperfection they take as given. The imperfections of society, in the poems about equating money with life (in "The Cemetery Bridge"), or countenancing political murders (in "Five Men"), or race murder (in June Jordan's poem) can *only* be responded to militantly, by poet and reader. The imperfections in human nature exhibited in the next three poems are sources of grief but lie beyond grievance. They invite various and complex response.

On Looking for Models
by Alan Dugan

The trees in time
have something else to do
besides their treeing. What is it.
I'm a starving to death
man myself, and thirsty, thirsty
by their fountains but I cannot drink
their mud and sunlight to be whole.
I do not understand these presences
that drink for months
in the dirt, eat light,
and then fast dry in the cold.
They stand it out somehow,
and how, the Botanists will tell me.
It is the "something else" that bothers
me, so I often go back to the forests.

Traveling through the Dark
by William Stafford

Traveling through the dark I found a deer
dead on the edge of the Wilson River road.
It is usually best to roll them into the canyon:
that road is narrow; to swerve might make more dead.

By glow of the tail-light I stumbled back of the car
and stood by the heap, a doe, a recent killing;
she had stiffened already, almost cold.
I dragged her off; she was large in the belly.

My fingers touching her side brought me the reason—
her side was warm; her fawn lay there waiting,
alive, still, never to be born.
Beside that mountain road I hesitated.

The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights;
under the hood purred the steady engine.
I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turning red;
around our group I could hear the wilderness listen.

I thought hard for us all—my only swerving—
then pushed her over the edge into the river.

The Whipping
by Robert Hayden

The old woman across the way
    is whipping the boy again
and shouting to the neighborhood
    her goodness and his wrongs.
Wildly he crashes through elephant ears,
    pleads in dusty zinnias,
while she in spite of crippling fat
    pursues and corners him.
She strikes and strikes the shrilly circling
    boy till the stick breaks
in her hand. His tears are rainy weather
    to woundlike memories:
My head gripped in bony vise
    of knees, the writhing struggle
to wrench free, the blows, the fear
    worse than blows that hateful
Words could bring, the face that I
    no longer knew or loved . . .
Well, it is over now, it is over,
    and the boy sobs in his room,
And the woman leans muttering against
    a tree, exhausted, purged—
avenged in part for lifelong hidings
    she has had to bear.

My third category will probably strike readers as having the same spinelessness as the category *other* in a quiz or *don't know* in a poll. But in the art which speaks most eloquently for human peculiarity, the poet as solitary seems as serious and deliberate as the socially active or passive poet. He is not at odds with either of them but for the moment removed from them by some concern he can share only person-to-person. Here then are three solitary poems.

The Boxcar Poem
by David Young

The boxcars drift by
clanking
they have their own
speech on scored
wood their own
calligraphy
Soo Line
they say in meadows
Lackawanna quick at crossings
Northern Pacific, a
nightmurmur, Northern
Pacific
even empty
they carry
in dark corners
among smells of wood and sacking
the brown wrappings of sorrow
the rank straws and revolution
the persistence of war
and often
as they roll past
like weathered obedient
angels you can see
right through them
to yourself
in a bright
field, a crow
on either shoulder.

Keeping Things Whole
by Mark Strand

In a field
I am the absence
of field.
This is
always the case.
Wherever I am
I am what is missing.
When I walk
I part the air
and always
the air moves in
to fill the spaces
where my body's been.
We all have reasons
for moving.
I move
to keep things whole.

The Bear
by David Fisher

Thrown from the boxcar of the train, the bear
rolls over and over. He sits up
rubbing his nose. This must be
some mistake,
there is no audience here.
He shambles off through the woods.
The forest is veined with trails,
he does not know which to follow.
The wind is rising, maple leaves turn up
their silver undersides in agony, there is a
smell in the air, and the lightning strikes.
He climbs a tree to escape. The rain
pours down, the bear is blue as a gall.

*

There is not much to eat
in the forest, only berries,
and some small delicious animals
that live in a mound and bite your nose.

*

The bear moves sideways through a broom-straw field.
He sees the hunters from the corner of his eye
and is sure they have come to take him back.
To welcome them, (though there is no calliope)
he does his somersaults, and juggles
a fallen log, and something
tears through his shoulder,
he shambles away in the forest and cries.
Do they not know who he is?

*

After a while, he learns to fish, to find
the deep pool and wait for the silver trout.
He learns to keep his paw up for spiderwebs.
There is only one large animal, with trees
on its head, that he cannot scare.

*

At last he is content to be
alone in the forest,
though sometimes he finds a clearing
and solemnly does his tricks,
though no one sees.

A poem like Zbigniew Herbert's "Five Men" must necessarily imply that its reasons are the most urgent reasons a poem can have, that other reasons are somehow trivial. Poems themselves are sometimes bullies, or seem to be. But this is true only as one hypothesis precludes another. Poetry has always resisted being used as propaganda simply because, like other fully created things, it contains and rejoices in contradictions. "When you organize one of the contradictory elements out of your work of art," Randall Jarrell tells us, "you are getting rid not just of it, but of the contradiction of which it was a part; and it is the contradictions in works of art which make them able to represent to us — as logical and methodical generalizations cannot — our world and our selves." Contradiction, complexity, mystery — these are not useful qualities in propaganda.

If some of my suggestions about how to *open* ourselves as readers are valid, they mean that we must be ready to be astonished, even when that is uncomfortable and morally expensive. When we engage a poem we should credit it with infinite options, not just the three which I have labored, which may strike the reader as obvious or incomplete or wrong. Whatever a poem is up to, it requires our trust along with our consent to let it try to change our way of thinking and feeling. Nothing without this risk. I expect hang-gliding must be like poetry. Once you get used to it, you can't imagine not wanting the scare of it. But it's more serious than hang-gliding. Poetry is the safest known mode of human risk. You risk only staying alive.

The Reason for Criticism

I see the chief similarity between criticism and poetry as this: they are truest to themselves when their impulse is generous and catholic. If poetry is accurate praise, then criticism should aspire to be accurate praise of praise. The second part of this essay will introduce three of my own poems, in an immodest attempt to show a similarity between the two forms of praise. It will be anecdotal, when it is not downright chatty.

Long before Randall Jarrell had condemned our age, in an essay of that name, as "The Age of Criticism," Robert Frost had said he *never read criticism*. His remark is reminiscent of a story from New Hampshire that dates from the early days of television. There's a little village in northern New Hampshire which I believe still closes its ballot-booth early so that it can attract national attention as the first township to record presidential returns. In the first election after we had visible reporters, an NBC correspondent traveled there to walk the morning streets and interview citizens. The well-prepared reporter stopped an old lady and asked her if she would be willing to tell the TV audience how she had voted. He gave her and the viewers a little civics lesson, telling her that he knew the privacy of the ballot was a sacred thing, nowhere more jealously guarded than in New England, etc. The encounter seemed to puzzle the old lady, so that the question, along with the sententious democracy, had to be repeated. Then she said sharply, "Oh, I never vote. It only encourages them."

I'm afraid Frost's refusal to read criticism bespoke the same exasperated irresponsibility. He once said that his idea of good criticism would be for two intelligent friends to sit together over a good book — it was Milton's *Comus* he gave as an example — and let the first reader point to a couple of lines and then pass the book to the second. This friend would read the passage over until he could, with conviction, nod. Then he would find another line or two that were similarly fraught for him, and pass the book back. Thus what had been said with genius would be partaken among intelligence.

I take the meaning of this dry parable to be: what can be marveled at in a work of art is marvelous *in its own terms*, and

that in the manner of Calvinism, either one marvels or one is cast out from marveling. Art resists criticism in the same way it resists paraphrase. Thus Flannery O'Connor wrote, "A story is a way to say something that can't be said any other way. . . . When somebody asks you what a story is about, the only proper thing is to tell him to read the story." The critic, Frost and O'Connor seem to be saying, can only point to a poem or story, or to a crucial passage in the poem or story. But many critics are like boring hosts who describe their self-explanatory travel pictures, standing the while between us and the screen or perhaps even between the projector and the screen. It becomes clear that what they are really pointing at is themselves.

"Criticism *does* exist, doesn't it," Randall Jarrell asks, as if to reassure himself that he is among reasonable people, "for the sake of the plays and stories and poems it criticizes?" And making the same assumption in the *The Dyer's Hand*, W. H. Auden goes on to tell how the critic can hope to serve the work he addresses:

> What is the function of a critic? So far as I am concerned, he can do me one or more of the following services:
>
> 1) Introduce me to authors or works of which I was hitherto unaware.
>
> 2) Convince me I have undervalued an author or a work because I had not read them carefully enough.
>
> 3) Show me relations between works of different ages and cultures which I should never have seen for myself because I do not know enough and never shall.

(This third function is abashing. Few of us are comfortable traversing the mythical desert of Wystan Hugh Auden's ignorance.)

> 4) Give a "reading" of a work which increases my understanding of it.
>
> 5) Throw light upon the process of artistic "Making."
>
> 6) Throw light upon the relation of art to life, to science, economics, religion, etc.

I have come to love this intimidating definition of criticism because it assumes that the critic and his reader, whatever their inequalities, are both looking at the work as if it were more interesting than themselves. This is the way I believe an artist looks at his work while he is creating it, and the critical insight is bound to profit from approaching the work in the same spirit. One would be embarrassed to say anything so obvious if one were not continually embarrassed by the vanity of criticism.

In the same essay, Auden writes:

> If good literary critics are rarer than good poets or novelists, one reason is the nature of human egoism. A poet or a novelist has to learn to be humble in the face of his subject matter which is life in general. But the subject matter of a critic, before which he has to learn to be humble, is made up of authors, that is to say, of human individuals, and this kind of humility is much more difficult to acquire. It is far easier to say — "Life is more important than anything I can say about it" than to say — "Mr. A's work is more important than anything I can say about it."
>
> Attacking bad books [Auden goes on to say] is not only a waste of time but also bad for the character. If I find a book really bad, the only interest I can derive from writing about it has to come from myself, from such display of intelligence, wit and malice as I can contrive. One cannot review a bad book without showing off.
>
> The injunction "Resist not evil but overcome evil with good" may in many spheres of life be impossible to obey literally, but in the sphere of art it is common sense. Bad art is always with us, but any given work of art is bad in a period way; the particular kind of badness it exhibits will pass away and be succeeded by some other kind. It is unnecessary, therefore, to attack it, because it will perish anyway. . . . The only sensible procedure for a critic is to keep silent about works which he believes to be bad, while at the same time vigorously campaigning for those he believes to be good, especially if they are being neglected or underestimated by the public. . . .
>
> Some books are undeservedly forgotten; none are undeservedly remembered.

The only time Robert Frost spoke to me about my poems was at a luncheon in the dining room of the Westbury Hotel in New York, where neither of us was at home, between (his) trains. What he said was something like this.

"Your poems are all right, I guess. But you may be getting tired of talking about yourself. It might be a good idea to look at some dramatic poems. There's not enough of that around now. You might want to look at Browning's monologues again, and some of Tennyson's, some of Robinson's. Maybe some of mine. Some things you can say better if you can get someone else to say them for you."

I'd heard him say on another occasion, when someone had mistaken "The Road Not Taken" for a self-portrait, that that poem had been written to tease his shy and indecisive friend Edward Thomas. "Can you imagine *me* saying anything *with a sigh?*"

And once he said, about "Mending Wall," that the neighbor farmer who says "Good fences make good neighbors"—that that character rather than the first person speaker was himself. "When I say me in a poem, it's someone else. When I say somebody else, it might be me."

"Everything written is as good as it is dramatic," he wrote in the introduction to his not very dramatic *A Way Out*, the little one-act play he never allowed to be reprinted.

Soon after our unlikely luncheon—I'm trying to suggest that the Westbury is excessively couth in ways neither of us aspired to—I was working on a poem about atoms. I had been sitting in on a freshman astronomy class, and Robert Bless, the very bright instructor, had said, simply in passing, that it was fortunate for the human animal that we had been fashioned to the scale we were. If we had been only a thousand times larger, we would be able to triangulate, with our wide-spaced eyes, and would have known from the start, by looking at the stars, that we were insignificant to an unnerving degree. On the other hand, if we'd been made a thousand times smaller, we would be able to see one another's pulsing atomic structure, which might have caused interpersonal mistrust even greater than at present.

Well, I was manipulating this data as it affected intelligent, interesting, sensitive, and charming me, and the muse was not warming to our subject. It must have been in an exasperated attempt to use Frost's advice that I gave the poem away. I gave it to a fourteen-year-old high-school student, approximately one-third my then age. I put him in Beloit, Wisconsin, where I'd once spent a night. And I made him black. These three mystifications seem to have enabled me to dramatize a mystery which, in my own character, I was only managing to explain away. This is the poem.

Walter Jenks' Bath

These are my legs. I don't have to tell them, legs,
Move up and down or which leg. They are black.
They are made of atoms like everything else,
Miss Berman says. That's the green ceiling
Which on top is the Robinsons' brown floor.
This is Beloit, this is my family's bathroom on the world.
The ceiling is atoms, too, little parts running
Too fast to see. But through them running fast,
Through Audrey Robinson's floor and tub
And the roof and air, if I lived on an atom
Instead of on the world, I would see space.
Through all the little parts, I would see into space.

Outside the air it is all black.
The far apart stars run and shine, no one has to tell them,
Stars, run and shine, or the same who tells my atoms
Run and knock so Walter Jenks, me, will stay hard and real.
And when I stop the atoms go on knocking,
Even if I died the parts would go on spinning,
Alone, like the far stars, not knowing it,
Not knowing they are far apart, or running,
Or minding the black distances between.
This is me knowing, this is what I know.

Robert Frost was generous to me in a number of ways. When the biographical pendulum swings, he will be known for quite a different man than the present vogue for monsters has conjured up. But "Walter Jenks' Bath" was a critical gift from Frost, a poem his critical insight had enabled me to find.

He turned to me once when I was traveling to California with him — turned *on* me, if I wanted to read the body language with which he delivered the question — and asked, in no context whatever, "You're not going to write about me, are you?" I replied defensively, as I do now, "Only to correct error, Robert."

Here's an egregious piece of error — out of the herd, as egregious used to mean — of ungenerous criticism that's been roaming the literary savannahs since Frost died. Before I offer it, let me quote civilized Randall Jarrell again, who incidentally wrote some permanently useful appreciation of Frost. In the first paragraph of what he terms his *complaint* against the age of criticism, he said: "I will try to spare other people's [feelings] by using no names at all." I too refrain from identifying the ill-tempered remarks I'm going to quote. Yet it's interesting how Jarrell manages to call names anonymously, as it were. His language seems to rant *ad hominem* when he levels certain charges:

Item: "A great deal of this criticism . . . is not only bad or mediocre, it is *dull;* it is, often, an astonishingly graceless, joyless, humorless, long-winded, niggling, blinkered, methodical, self-important, cliché-ridden, prestige-obsessed, almost autonomous criticism."

Item: (Speaking of the way critics look down on the literary insights of creative artists) "In the same way, if a pig wandered up to you during a bacon-judging contest, you would say impatiently, 'Go away, pig! What do you know about bacon?' "

Item: "Many critics are bad, I think, because they have spent their life in card-indexes. . . . If works of art were about card-indexes the critic could prepare himself for them in this way, but as it is he cannot."

We need this kind of name-calling, where error is turned into allegorical drama. In quoting the two critical lapses, the two dreadful pieces of slanderous criticism, below, I hope readers will take them as allegories of the character any of us can become when he tries to write of that which he cannot praise.

The criticism is followed immediately by my poem, which intends a kind of appreciation of Frost's life and work. Both address the charge of lying. I maintain that in his life and work Frost understood that telling the truth is the difficult name of both games, life and poetry:

> It is not that Frost was cold, that he was a tyrant as well as a coward, that he could no more forgive a generous than a selfish act (the former a judgment, the latter a threat), that he treated his friends as if they were enemies and his enemies as if they were himself. No. The shock is that he was from start to finish, and in nearly every aspect of his life, a successful liar. Exposures which to other men might have been the moral lesson and warning of a lifetime were to Frost merely hints that he ought to refine his tactics. To him, age brought only a new birth of vanity, new interests to protect, a thousand new reasons for hoarding all the old deceptions. This makes him terrifying.
>
> Along with Whitman, Dickinson and Stevens, Frost has a place among the greatest of American writers. We know something about the lives of all these poets and they were all isolated souls. Dickinson was fierce in her detachment, Whitman troubled by it, Stevens at perfect ease. Frost is really in a different class: a more hateful human being cannot have lived who wrote words that moved other human beings to tears. Filled with hate, and worth hating: after reading these three careful volumes, one feels that to stand in the same room with a man about whom one knew a quarter of the things one now knows about Frost would be more than one could bear.

In Memory of Robert Frost

Everyone had to know something, and what they said
About that, the thing they'd learned by curious heart,
They said well.
That was what he wanted to hear,
Something you had done too exactly for words,
Maybe, but too exactly to lie about either.
Compared to such talk, most conversation
Is inadvertent, low-keyed lying.

If he walked in fear of anything, later on
(Except death, which he died with a healthy fear of)
It was that he would misspeak himself. Even his smile
He administered with some care, accurately.
You could not put words in his mouth
And when you quoted him in his presence
There was no chance that he would not contradict you.

Then there were apparent samenesses he would not
Be deceived by. The presidents of things,
Or teachers, braggarts, poets
Might offer themselves in stereotype
But he would insist on paying attention
Until you at least told him an interesting lie.
(That wa. perhaps your field of special knowledge?)
The only reason to lie, he said, was for a purpose:
To get something you wanted that bad.

I told him a couple — to amuse him,
To get something I wanted, his attention?
More likely, respite from that blinding attention,
More likely, a friendship
I felt I could only get by stealing.

What little I'd learned about flying
Must have sweated my language lean. *I'd respect you*
For that if for nothing else, he said not smiling
The time I told him, thirty-two night landings
On a carrier, or thirty-two night catapult shots—
Whatever it was, true, something I knew.

For more than six years I have been writing about Edward John Trelawny, the friend of Shelley and Byron who met those two men near to the time of their tragic deaths, and was associated with both of them even in death. He was an outsize and attractively outrageous man, and probably only the fact that I managed to survive, in character, a friendship with Frost emboldens me to keep Trelawny for an imaginery playmate. Before I am done, I want to do a series of poems about him and about his acquaintances there in Italy and Greece in the 1820s. I have come to like and believe him. I believe he tells by and large generous truths about Shelley and Byron, the former of whom he idolized, the latter of whom he saw plain. That this is temporarily an unfashionable position will be made clear by the following quotation from a review of a recent biography of Trelawny:

"Lies, lies, lies!" Edward Trelawny in his later years would shout when anyone else attempted conversation in his presence; and the widespread delusion that anyone really rude must be sincere gained him in his own day a reputation as a daring exposer of other people's pretences and hypocrisies. Most of his earlier biographers have swallowed whole his own unconscionable lies about his life story and his relations with Byron and Shelley. William St. Clair, in his new biography *Trelawny: The Incurable Romancer*, has not been taken in by his subject. He coolly demonstrates that Trelawny never became a picturesque corsair, but spent his whole time at sea as a sullen and unsuccessful midshipmen, never winning promotion in spite of his family influence, even in a period when other men could become commanders at eighteen. He shows that it was Trelawny's inept design of an unseaworthy boat that caused Shelley's death, and that Trelawny's much boasted intimacy with Shelley actually lasted only six months, and with Byron only eighteen months, and that many of his anecdotes about them are demonstrably untrue. He deflates Trelawny's only real-life romantic adventure, in which, by unerringly attaching himself to the most ruffianly and treacherous of the Greek guerrillas, Trelawny condemned himself to an inglorious part in the Greek War of Independence, and ended up with a shot in the back from a man whom he ought to have been shrewd enough to suspect.

The Trelawny who emerges from this biography is rude, dirty, violent, revengeful, boastful, self-absorbed and totally untruthful; a resentful son, an unkind husband, a callous father, an untrustworthy friend, a rebel only because he hated authority, not because he had any genuine ideals or love of repressed humanity.

. . .

For historians and biographers, the only useful thing to know about this odious man is that he knew two great poets and was a liar, so that what he says about them is untrustworthy.

It is to Auden that most of us are indebted for the apropos thing C. G. Lichtenberg, otherwise an unread author to me, said. C. G. Lichtenberg said, "A book is a mirror: if an ass peers into it, you can't expect an apostle to look out."

My poem seems to intend another, and I think a more accurate, account of Trelawny.

Trelawny's Dream

The dark illumination of a storm
and water-noise, chuckling along the hull
as the craft runs tight before it.
Sometimes Shelley's laughter wakes me here,
unafraid, as he was the day he dove
into water for the first time, a wooded pool
on the Arno, and lay like a conger eel

on the bottom—"where truth lies," he said—
until I hauled him up.

But oftener the dream insists on all,
insists on retelling all.
Ned Williams is the first
to see the peril of the squall. His shout
to lower sail scares the deck-boy wide-eyed
and cuts off Shelley's watery merriment.
The big wind strokes the cat-boat like a kitten.
Riding the slate-grey hillocks, she is dragged
by the jib Ned Williams leaves to keep her head.
The kitten knows the wind is a madman's hand
and the bay a madman's lap.
As she scuds helpless, only the cockney boy
Charles Vivian and I, a dreamer and a child,
see the felucca loom abeam. Her wet lateen
ballooning in the squall, she cuts across
wind and seas in a wild tack, she is on us.
The beaked prow wrenches the little cabin
from the deck, tosses the poet slowly to the air—
he pockets his book, he waves to me and smiles—
then to his opposite element,
light going into darkness, gold into lead.
The felucca veers and passes, a glimpse of a face
sly with horror on her deck. I watch our brave
sailor boy stifle his cry of knowledge
as the boat takes fatal water, then Ned's stricken face,
scanning the basalt waves
for what will never be seen again except in dreams.

All this was a long time ago, I remember.
None of them was drowned except me
whom a commotion of years washes over.
They hail me from the dream, they call an old man
to come aboard, these youths on an azure bay.
The waters may keep the dead, as the earth may,
and fire and air. But dream is my element.
Though I am still a strong swimmer
I can feel this channel widen as I swim.

I have intruded these last two poems because I think they make the point that even very impressionistic and oblique praise can enlighten a subject critically more effectively than the most attentive destructive act. It is interesting that the two reviewers I have quoted were both talking, in the quotations, not about the biography purporting to be under review but instead are reviewing the lives of the dead men.

To be sure, the critic has responsibility to define and identify excellence, and this implies comparative judgments. These, too, are useful in proportion as they are generous. Comparison can be constructive. I will conclude with a paragraph of Jarrell's, where he wants to praise Whitman's genius for free verse, and to compare it with the limiting conventional prosody of one of Whitman's greatest contemporaries, Tennyson. Note the respect and affection—which amounts to praise—for Tennyson that emerges from this nice comparison, intended only for the aggrandizement of Whitman. Jarrell has been quoting the "Song of Myself":

> I understand the large hearts of heroes,
> The courage of present times and all times,
> How the skipper saw the crowded and rudderless wreck of the steam-ship, and Death chasing it up and down the storm,
> How he knuckled tight and gave not back an inch, and was faithful of days and faithful of nights,
> And chalked in large letters on a board, Be of good cheer, we will not desert you;
> How he follow'd with them and tack'd with them three days and would not give it up,
> How he saved the drifting company at last,
> How the lank loose-gown'd women looked when boated from the side of their prepared graves,
> How the silent old-faced infants and the lifted sick, and the sharp-lipp'd unshaved men;
> All this I swallow, it tastes good, I like it well, it becomes mine,
> I am the man, I suffered, I was there.

In the last lines of this quotation Whitman has reached — as great writers always reach — a point at which criticism seems not only unnecessary but absurd: these lines are so good that even admiration feels like insolence, and one is ashamed of anything that one can find to say about them. How anyone can dismiss or accept patronizingly the man who wrote them, I do not understand.

The enormous and apparent advantages of form, of omission and selection, of the highest degree of organization, are accompanied by important disadvantages — and there are far greater works than *Leaves of Grass* to make us realize this. But if we compare Whitman with that very beautiful poet Alfred Tennyson, the most skillful of all Whitman's contemporaries, we are at once aware how much Tennyson has had to leave out, even in those discursive poems where he is trying to put everything in. Whitman's poems *represent* his world and himself much more satisfactorily than Tennyson's do his. In the past a few poets have both formed and represented, each in the highest degree; but in modern times what controlling, organizing, selecting poet has created a world with as much in it as Whitman's, a world that so plainly is the world?

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